

ARMENIAN/POLICE RELATIONSHIPS:
A STUDY OF CONTRASTS

Article

by

Lieutenant Michael J. Rock

Command College Class XXVIX

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Background

The City of Glendale, California is situated in the heart of Los Angeles County. Glendale borders Hollywood to the west and Pasadena to the east. The Los Angeles River flows alongside the city's westernmost border. Glendale is comprised of approximately 33 square miles. The downtown portion of the city is comprised of high-rise office towers and commercial establishments. The northern regions are affluent residential canyon areas while the southernmost portion of the city is high density, multi-family apartments and condominiums. The southern portion is the least affluent portion of the city, and contains one of the highest rates of public assisted living in the County of Los Angeles. At the same time the area supports 1,207 companies owned or operated by Armenian immigrants.¹ Glendale is a city of approximately 200,000 people living in a mix of great affluence and great poverty. The city had traditionally been a bedroom community of Hollywood back in the 1950's and 1960's. Redevelopment came to the city in the late 70's, and the city experienced a boom in construction. Along with the massive building of the 1980's, came an influx of new citizens. Due to instability in Armenia and the offer of great opportunity in the United States, there was a great migration of Armenians to the City of Glendale that had traditionally been an all white Anglo-Saxon Protestant community. The issue became, what type of relationship would the police and Armenian community enjoy in this dynamic environment?

The city began to experience growing pains with the new redevelopment districts and the new immigrant population. Latino and Asian populations were growing at the same time as the Armenian immigration experience. In the 1990's the main criminal enterprise in the

¹Glendale, California, "Workforce Investment Act, Five Year Plan" Federal Grant (2000), sec. 3-4-31.

city was the trafficking of Colombian cocaine. By the end of the decade, the Glendale Police Department Narcotics Detail had done a very effective job in eliminating the influence of Colombian drug traffickers as well as their product from the streets of the city. More recently, the emerging crime problem in the City of Glendale is the rise of Russian Armenian organized crime activities, which includes extortion, robbery, protection, and murder.

The City of Glendale is approximately 40 percent Armenian. The relationship between the Armenian community and the Glendale Police Department is an interesting one. Although often strained and uncompromising, the Armenian community as a whole appreciates what the Glendale PD is trying to do. Recent immigrants to the city want their children to grow up in an environment that is as safe as possible. The Armenians come from an environment where police work and police officers in general are viewed very differently than they are in America. Some police officers believe the Armenian community does not understand them. Further, some officers feel most Armenians are unwilling to integrate themselves into the American way of life.

With the arrival of the Armenian population, a certain segment of the Armenian youth formed their own gang in the city called Armenian Power (AP). AP is one of the three leading gangs in the city in terms of activity. The other two are Hispanic gangs, namely Westside Locos and Toonerville. Both are long time Glendale area gangs. Tensions among AP, Westside Locos, and Toonerville have escalated over the years. Needless to say, the arrival of a new Armenian gang presents unique challenges to the police.

The relationship between the Glendale Police Department and the Armenian community requires scrutiny because the City of Glendale is rapidly changing. There is a great deal of misunderstanding among the cultures that call Glendale their home. Racial and ethnic tensions are felt on the school grounds, in the commercial centers, the regions of affluence, and specifically in the high-density regions of the city. It is important that the police understand the

new members of this community, and garner their trust and support. Failure to study the participants of this equation will only result in more racial and ethnic tensions, and lead to a more isolated, removed, and unsupported policing organization. This type of environment needs only a spark to ignite potential unrest.

History

In order to understand the future relationships between the Armenian community and the police, it is important to study the Armenian past. Culture, relationships with authority figures and institutions, governmental structure and effectiveness, economy, and other factors, all play a role in explaining the Armenian citizen in America today.

The formal name of this country is the Republic of Armenia.² The capital of Armenia is Erevan. Armenia is situated with Turkey on the west and Iran to the south. The great expanse of Russia lies to the north, beyond the Georgian border. Azerbaijan is due east, and beyond Azerbaijan lies the Caspian Sea. Armenia is landlocked, with the only other large body of water, the Black Sea, lying beyond the Georgian republic. The 1994 population count of the country was 3,521,517. The population overwhelmingly belongs to the Armenian Apostolic Church, with 94 percent of the people claiming such affiliation.³ Other religions also include Russian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant denominations, and Islam. Education is compulsory through secondary school, and literacy is estimated at 100 percent. National heritage has been emphasized within the educational system over the last several years. The health care system today in Armenia is in shambles. Former Soviet-era guarantee of universal care was the norm; however, this all but disappeared when Armenia became independent. Today there is a reported

² Glen E. Curtis, ed. 1994, *Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia: country studies* (Washington: Library of Congress 1994), 3.

³ Ibid.

shortage of basic medical supplies and many hospitals are closed.⁴ The gross national product of Armenia is estimated at 2.7 billion U.S. dollars. The economy was crippled after the 1989 Azerbaijani blockade of fuel and other important materials. Agriculture was privatized in 1990, and today many farms are small, yet productive. It is important to note that Armenia has an estimated trade deficit with the United States of over 137 million U.S. dollars. Armenia has a highly centralized governmental system, where salaries and prices are indexed and currency devaluation is used to balance supply and demand.⁵ While Armenia enjoys no inland waterways, it does have ten regional airports, a national roadway and rail system, and extensive telecommunications facilities. The national government maintains most of the power in Armenia. The political process for reform is notoriously slow. Turkey and Iran are considered by many to be natural enemies of the Armenian people.⁶ The armed forces of Armenia are divided into the army, air force, and air defense forces, with a combined fighting force of approximately 50,000 personnel. One Russian division has remained in Armenia since the breakup of Communism. The 1992 military budget for the Armenian defense forces was approximately 33.8 million U.S. dollars.⁷ The internal security of the nation is run by State Administration for National Security, and border troops are supplemented by Russian forces along the Iranian and Turkish borders. Militia is used as regular police, employing over 1,000 troops. The duties of these troops also include the detection of narcotics, which is a priority for the authorities. It is interesting to note that some units of the former Committee for State Security (KGB) function under Armenian control.⁸

Genocide

⁴ Ibid., 4.

⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁶ Ibid., 6.

⁷ Ibid., 7.

Under the Ottoman Empire, the Armenians suffered two great tragedies. At the close of the 19th century, the Armenians' tendency toward Europeanization encouraged Turkish officials' view that Armenians were a foreign, subversive element.⁹ In 1895, the Ottoman suspicions of the increasingly westernized Armenian population led to the massacre of approximately 300,000 Armenians. The Armenian survivors of this massacre that remained in the Ottoman Empire supported the 1908 revolution of the Committee of Union and Progress. Also known as the Young Turks, they promised better treatment of ethnic minorities. Once this revolution became successful, the Young Turks plotted the elimination of the surviving Armenians who were viewed as an obstacle to the regime's agenda.¹⁰ Thus, the stage was set for an even more ambitious and heinous act to be carried out against the Armenian population. In the beginning stages of World War I, Russian armies advanced on Turkey from the north, and the British attempted an invasion from the Mediterranean. Fearing rebellion, the Ottoman government ordered large-scale roundups, deportations, and systematic torture and murder of Armenians beginning in the spring of 1915. Estimates are approximate and range from 600,000 to 2 million deaths out of the prewar population of about 3 million Armenians. By 1917, fewer than 200,000 Armenians remained in Turkey.¹¹ Regardless of the exact numbers, it is quite clear that Armenians suffered a significant disaster that shifted the center of the Armenian population from what was once their heartland to the safer eastern regions held by the Russians.¹² These events changed the Armenian geopolitical situation forever. Today, the Armenian genocide is very much in the consciousness of the Armenian people, and continues to be an area of extreme sensitivity.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 14.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 15.

¹² Ibid.

Communism

While Joseph Stalin was in power from 1926-1953, Armenian society and its economy were changed significantly by the ruling elite who were in power at the time.¹³ Over a 25-year period, Armenia was industrialized and educated under stern conditions, and all efforts toward nationalism were strictly suppressed.¹⁴ Only after the death of Stalin did Moscow allow greater nationalism. However, the corruption in communist rule continued until the very downfall of Communism in 1991. In the early 1980's, Armenia was continuing its transformation from an agrarian nation to an industrial society, only a third of Armenians lived in the countryside, and the ruling elite remained largely unchanged.¹⁵ Corruption grew and an illegal black market economy flourished. Even Karen Demirchian, the political reformer that Moscow had sent to Erevan to clean up the old party apparatus, soon joined the corrupt influences that he discovered in place.¹⁶ With the downfall of communism in 1991, the Armenian people went to the polls and approved the Republic's commitment to independence. The mandate was clear; the Armenian people were voicing their desire of self-sufficiency and independence from the Soviet Union.

Crime

After the Armenian people gained their independence, a special internal security force was formed under the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The original mission of this unit was to protect military installations in the beginning months of independence. In the early to mid-1990's, there was a widespread breakdown of law and order in the Republic as Soviet rule came to an end. The Ministry of Internal Affairs also acted as the sole police force in Armenia. Originally the unit was comprised of 1,000 troops, which contained one assault battalion, three

¹³ Ibid., 17.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 18.

¹⁶ Ibid.

specialized companies, a canine unit for drug detection, and one element of the former Soviet KGB.¹⁷ During this time of transition, Armenia suffered a large increase in gang activity from an organized Mafia. Overall, crime increased 11.5 percent from 1990 to 1991, then it more than doubled the following year.¹⁸ The largest increases in crime in Armenia were now for murder, robbery, armed robbery, rape and aggravated assault. Juvenile crime jumped 40 percent, and drug-related crimes increased 240 percent. In 1992, 80 percent of crimes committed in Armenia were drug related.¹⁹ During the mid-1990's, the police temporarily limited the activity of a few large gangs. However, the leaders of these gangs were well known in Armenian society and they used their influence in parliament to protect their operations and hinder investigations and prosecutions. Today, organized crime in the era of post-Soviet rule is still an enormous problem for authorities. The judicial system in Armenia operates three major prisons. The major institutions are in Sovetashen, Artik, and Kosh. All prisons are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The system operates in two general categories, labor colonies, and prison communities where reforms have established general and high security reform schools for teenagers; general and high security prisons for women; and four grades of prisons for men.²⁰ Military crimes, first degree murder, rape of a minor, treason, espionage, and terrorism were all subject to the death penalty.²¹ Since 1993 Armenia remained a weak state whose legal system was severely challenged by the activities of regional and family clans, criminal gangs with diverse operations, widespread corruption, and occasional assassinations of political figures.

¹⁷ Ibid., 76

¹⁸ Ibid., 77.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Bid

²¹ Ibid., 78.

Lawlessness, war and material shortages, uncertainty about the future, and popular suspicion about the ruling elite, threatened to undermine the new regime.²²

Earthquake

Perhaps a good illustration that will attest to the societal condition in Armenia within recent years, was the 1988 earthquake. On December 7, 1988, a major earthquake struck the regions of Leninakan, Spitak, and Kirovakan, with a resulting death toll in the tens of thousands. The Ministry of Health was quickly overwhelmed.²³ There were shortages of bandages, medicine, and blood. Observers noted that there was also a lack of doctors at the disaster scenes, and a lack of basic knowledge in how to treat the wounded. The international community responded en masse. The earthquake was officially recorded at level 10 on the Richter scale, which is the equivalent of ten atom bombs. Initially, 23,390 people were officially recorded as killed in the earthquake, more than one half million people were homeless, and over 150 villages and communities were destroyed.²⁴ When the earthquake struck, Soviet Prime Minister Mikhail Gorbachev was visiting the United States. Many earthquake survivors condemned the initial lack of action of the Soviet Union. There were reports that much of the international foreign aid disappeared after arriving in Armenia. Most people were still living in tents a year and a half after the earthquake, and in Leninakan, the Russian federation that was responsible for rebuilding the majority of the housing stock, had not constructed even one house after 18 months. Intercommunal fighting, sabotage, strikes, theft and government inaction were all blamed on the slow progress of the reconstruction efforts in Armenia.²⁵ The government was largely viewed as ineffectual at best, and corrupt at worst. Another disturbing trend came to

²² Ibid.

²³ Yuri Rost, *Armenian Tragedy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 93.

²⁴ Ibid., 189.

²⁵ Ibid., 192.

light during the hectic days after the earthquake. In Leninakan, while over 80 percent of the city's structures had been damaged, the rate of damage of buildings constructed during the last two years prior to the earthquake was over 95 percent.²⁶ An irate people wanted to know how the inferior buildings were allowed to be constructed, and who would be held to answer for the shoddy workmanship as well as use of sub-standard materials. It was widely believed that corruption allowed these events to occur and go unpunished. This did nothing to endear the Armenian government to the population at large. A common question frequently asked by the people in this region, was why their government would build nuclear power stations in earthquake country. In the Georgia Republic, the government allowed construction of the Medzamor nuclear power station along a very well known fault line. At the time of construction, this power station did not meet Soviet safety standards, which are far less than those imposed on reactor facilities in the United States.²⁷ This type of government irresponsibility was repeated in the Armenian Republic as well. In his book *Black Dog of Fate*, Peter Balakian states that the number of Armenians who died from injuries as a direct result of the 1988 earthquake is closer to 50,000 people, including thousands of children who were killed in the collapse of their schools.²⁸ There is widespread agreement among the experts that the substandard building materials and rampant corruption during the Khrushchev and Brezhnev years played a significant role in the collapse of many commercial and governmental buildings.

Karabagh

Directly on the heels of the 1988 earthquake, came another in the series of disasters to befall Armenia. This particular disaster became known as the Nagorno-Karabagh crisis.

²⁶ Stephen Brook, *Claws of the Crab* (Great Britain: Sinclair Stevenson, 1992), 227.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Peter Balakian, *Black Dog of Fate* (New York:Basic Books, 1997), 276.

Karabagh is a mountainous region to the east of Armenia. This land was part of ancient Armenia, and during 1989 the population there was close to ninety percent Armenian.

However, this section was now firmly in the Republic of Azerbaijan since 1923, when the Bolsheviks gave the province to the Turkic Republic of Azerbaijan.²⁹ Now that Armenia was independent from Soviet dominion, it was also free from Soviet protection. Soon these differences grew into a war between the Karabagh Armenians and the Azeris. This resulted in an Azerbaijan-imposed blockade that cut petroleum and natural gas to the new Republic of Armenia. Humanitarian and medical supplies were also cut off. During the harsh winter months, Armenians froze in unheated apartments and earthquake-damaged houses. Food was often scarce, hospitals operated without basic necessities, and the population began to burn anything for warmth. Trees became precious sources of firewood, and were cut down everywhere, and “Armenia began turning into a land of tree stumps.”³⁰ The Armenians, who were once fairly loyal to the Soviet Union, could not understand why Mikhail Gorbachev would not assist them in regaining their territory. The Soviet Union took the side of the Azerbaijanis. The Armenian people never forgave Gorbachev for this as well as the suffering they endured during the harsh winter months. This struggle is ongoing, and is an example of why certain Armenian factions are so distrustful of organized government.

Activity Plan

When one takes a look at the forces that shape the relationship issues between Armenian immigrants and American Police Officers, it is readily apparent that there are steps that can be taken which would lend themselves towards smoother relationships.

Ideally, it would pay significant benefits to allow one manager to visit a counterpart in a country with a sizable representative population in Glendale. These trips can be staggered to

eliminate staffing issues and need not be for extended stays. Perhaps a week working with a counterpart in Soviet Armenia, Historical Armenia, or one of the Asian countries would allow our officers to understand the often unspoken issues facing many immigrants in our city. The Chief of Police could pick the country to be visited for that fiscal year. The expectation is for the executive or manager to create working relationships in the foreign country while learning about the people, governmental and authority structures, institutions, the role of police and its relationship to the people, and crime trends or patterns that are unique to that nation. That manager or executive would be the in-house expert at the police department, to deal with related issues. There is great benefit in being encouraged to really learn about other people by immersing oneself completely in their culture. Immigrant leaders in Glendale would also be invited to cultural training sessions at the Glendale Police Department to learn about the issues, fear, and frustrations of front line patrol officers. Patrol Officers would be called upon to speak to these leaders about their experiences on the streets. Perhaps learning about the experiences of police officers would cause leaders to look at both sides of confrontational issues. Other thoughts to be considered are as follows:

1. As the relationship among the leaders grows, a member of the Armenian community may be selected to come speak to the officers in an open forum. Sensitive and passionate topics will be allowed as long as appropriate decorum and respect is maintained. Russian/Armenian organized crime is alive and well in Glendale. Participants should not be afraid of openly speaking about issues that pose a great threat to the quality of life in the city.
2. Experiment with cross-cultural training sessions that are not mandated. Executives, managers, supervisors, officers, sworn and non-sworn would be free to attend the cross cultural trips or speaking engagements without fear of having it held over their

heads. Perhaps if these trips or sessions are interesting enough, they will attract a following.

3. The transition team will identify other issues that need to be addressed and be in a position to make recommendations directly to the City Manager and his staff. This process would require direct participation and oversight by the City Manager.
4. The creation of a special Armenian Liaison Unit that would be a clearinghouse for all issues related to the Armenian community. This unit would have Armenian speakers, a thorough knowledge of Armenian history, be skilled in Russian/Armenian Organized Crime issues, and be a conduit through which the Armenian community could interact with the police department. This could be the unit that would respond whenever there is a crisis in the Armenian community. It is time for such a unit to deal with specific issues in the largest immigrant population of our city.
5. The creation of an Armenian language program offered for free to any personnel that wish to learn the Armenian language. Perhaps this program could be taught in levels. Level 1 for first responders, level 2 would be more detailed and tailored to meet the needs of in-depth interviewers. Again, this language program should not be mandatory.

Conclusion

As a law enforcement professional that will be working for the City of Glendale for many years to come it is important to know more about the largest and fastest growing immigrant group in the City of Glendale. At the same time, the Armenian community also needs to learn more about the American law enforcement profession. The cultural immersion would enhance any administrator's effectiveness as the years go by. It is obvious to all stakeholders that there is tension between the Armenian community and the police in the City of Glendale. This tension is

due largely to misperceptions. The relationship between the two groups will improve as a new generation of Armenians becomes assimilated into our culture. However, at any given moment, a minor spark could trigger a larger confrontation on the streets of our city. It is worthwhile to have a unit such as the Armenian Liaison Unit that will further the goals of cultural understanding, and crisis management. American law enforcement representatives must be at the forefront of any relationship enhancement efforts. Failure to do so will have an undermining impact upon our overall effectiveness.

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